

ELSAH HISTORY

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P.O. Box 117
ELSAH, ILLINOIS 62028

THE ELSAH MURAL IN THE MCNAIR-HOSMER HOUSE



edited by Inge Mack



Murals have been created throughout time and in practically every culture. They were made for different purposes and with different techniques, but each, in order to be murals, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica had to be "a painting applied to and made integral with the surfaces of a wall or ceiling." Mural painting is thus basically different from other forms of pictorial art in that it is integrally connected with architecture.

In prehistoric times Cro-Magnon man, living in what is now southern France, decorated the walls of his caves with beautiful, flat, linear depictions of what we now surmise to have been religious evocations of the hunt. The shapes of these cave walls are often incorporated into the curves of the depicted animals, to an exciting effect.

In later periods other peoples decorated the interiors of their homes, public places, temples, churches and even their tombs with a wide range of subjects, including landscape, still-life, and figurative scenes. For example in Pompeii, discoveries were made of muralled walls and mosaic covered floors, in both homes and public places, that were meant to enrich the life of the living. And we know today about everyday life in Egypt during the times of the Pharaohs because of the

murals in the pyramids. These murals were supposed to help the deceased enjoy the pleasures of the afterlife.

Depending on the social customs of the times, murals were solely decorative, or also commemorative and/or instructive. The Christian Church in Italy early realized the potential of pictorial instruction and became one of the most important patrons when Popes and other clerical dignitaries vied for the best artists and the most important commissions with the political and cultural leaders of rival families who dominated the various city states. Artists like Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael come to mind, and, of course, Michelangelo with his inspiring Sistine Chapel.

Never before or since has there been a higher degree of creative concentration of artist and patron than that found in the Italian Renaissance. Almost always the subject of the commission depended on the patron, and an expanded group of secular patrons consisted not only of the state and/or the royal courts, but also, in much larger numbers, the newly developing merchant class.

Mural painting was certainly not confined to Italy, and throughout Europe for several centuries the concept of decorating interior walls gradually became more accessible and popular to the middle class. By the time

American colonies had prospered to include relatively wealthy merchants, direct trade with such countries as France influenced neo-classical styles. Among the flood of imported goods were French block-printed scenic wallpapers. However, these papers were expensive, and a similar effect was achieved by "itinerant limners" who travelled from town to town painting murals in the homes of more settled American families.

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In the fall of 1972, the Hosmer family purchased the McNair House in Elsah from Kathryn Johnson, but they did not move into 66 Mill Street until March of 1973 after major structural alterations had been made. During the summer of 1973, Charles Hosmer was engaged in the final research of his second major volume on the history of historic preservation in America. (It finally appeared under the title ***Preservation Comes of Age***.) The Hosmers stayed at the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum during June of 1973, and they noticed the similarities between their entrance hall in Elsah and the Carroll Stair Hall in the main museum building at Winterthur. They agreed to ask Glenn Felch if he would like to undertake a mural on Elsah subjects after he had viewed the pictures of the Carroll Stair Hall.

In 1966 and 1967 Charles Hosmer and Paul O. Williams had collaborated on the first edition of ***Elsah: A Historic Guidebook***. At about that same time, Hosmer collaborated with Glenn Felch, a studio art major at Principia College, on a series of panels that would recreate the Elsah waterfront at various times in the history of the village. These large paintings are now in the Village museum with reproductions hanging in the Elsah Landing Restaurant. After graduation from Principia, Felch went right into graduate school at Bowling Green University, and was encouraged to start working on very large canvases. He temporarily had to interrupt his studies to serve for two years in the Army where he again wound up doing some very large mural-like panels for the military. Two years later, after completing graduate school, Glenn returned to join the faculty at Principia College, and the Hosmers proposed the mural as a means of giving him a chance to express his thoughts on Elsah after an extended absence.

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Following are some thoughts on the Elsah mural by Glenn Felch, the artist, and Charles Hosmer, the patron, as recorded during the actual painting of the work in 1973.

Glenn: As mentioned before, in graduate school I did some very large canvases. These were frequently in a montage sort of arrangement, which I became rather fond of doing—taking pieces of architecture which I had always enjoyed and putting them together on a two-dimensional canvas in interesting spatial relationships. When I came back to Elsah in the summer of '73, the village subject matter was still very familiar to me, and I began to think that it would be fun to treat the village in the montage approach which I had begun using in the

last few years.

Charles: How have you viewed in your evolution the marriage of art and architecture?

Glenn: Well, originally I was very much thinking I'd like to become connected in some form of architecture. But, I was not sure. However, I found it difficult to find a relationship between the creative, that is, between the artist who has a general interest in being innovative and the historian or the architect who is usually concerned with accuracy. In my own work I've been much more involved in taking the spirit of the thing and letting that come along first. And, I am less concerned about if a window is properly placed. I think over the last few years, in my own work, a marriage between the two has evolved into the creative taking the primary role and the historical taking the subservient role.

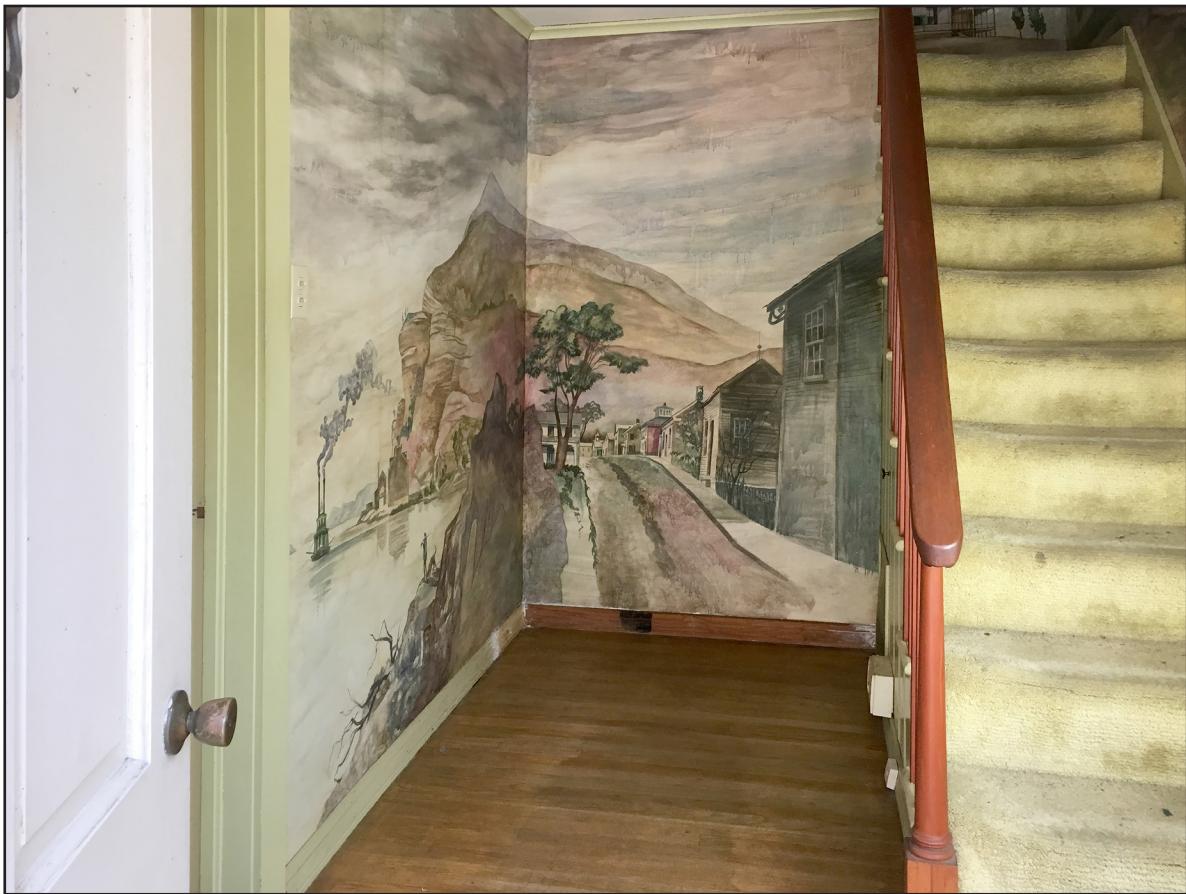
Asked to comment on how that marriage has come into being, so far, in the evolution of these panels, he answered:

Glenn: Well, the panels have been largely based upon documentation, in fact, of photographs that are extant from the collections of various people in the village. I think more than anything else, rather than changing things a lot, I have eliminated things, so that there is not so much discrepancy as there is the openness and the letting loose of the imagination to fill in things I have left out. But these panels are very much improvisational. Of course, when you are faced with a wall, and you have dimensions and so forth, and you have a canvas filling large areas, you have to let the wall speak first and let the subject matter fit into that. In other words, let the two work harmoniously together. Therefore, if you try to maintain the strictly historic, you have difficulties.

The patron was asked to comment concerning the marriage of this mural with his interest in preservation.

Charles: There's a better way to get at it, and it may be something to some degree that Glenn and I have in common, coming from different directions. People who deal with history, one way or another, seem to me to fall into roughly two groups. They either see history as words on the printed page and something very far distant that may or may not have influence on them, but somehow is necessary to follow. Or history may be for them a living thing; it may be an extension of their faculties. And I hope I fall in this latter group where history becomes a living thing. And, I think Glenn sees, probably, in these buildings in scenes in juxtapositions, etc. organic entities. He sees a thing that he is painting and probably also, to some degree, possesses a feel for the people, the times, the history, as it evolved. And, the same thing has happened with me. We knew that 19th-century buildings had murals often in hallways. Well, when we asked Glenn to do this, one intention certainly was to give him as much freedom as possible to do whatever he chose to do. Because it makes sense to me that these murals should not only express him, but him now, as he sees things without a lot of interruption from us. And I would be surprised, if Glenn were doing these murals today,









the same way he would have done them in 1967 or '68. But, it also seems to me that – to a surprising degree, at least upstairs, insofar as these murals have developed – he tended to deal with Elsah of the past almost more than Elsah as it is right now. I think he's in the process of a subtle transition that will lead more and more into the Elsah of 1973.

While cleaning a paintbrush, Glenn was asked to comment about the difference between a mural and a painting.

Glenn: In the traditional idea of a mural, Americans usually picture works that were done during the WPA period [The Works Progress Administration was started in 1935 by the government for the purpose of creating jobs.] - the making of very large paintings in post offices and federal buildings. This time such American names as John Steuart Curry, Thomas Hart Benton, and Grant Wood come to mind, who used as subject matter American History. Of course the concept of a mural had been around for centuries. I think a mural, from a standpoint of definition, is something which covers a large surface, and therefore usually has a time/space relationship. Now this mural, however, does not include that specific relationship. It has the size of a mural, and the attempt is to achieve certain aesthetic transitions from one point to another. But, there is no conscious arrangement of consecutive time unifying the whole pieces of work. This is primarily because the mural is a montage. A typical painting in obvious contrast, is usually by itself, its own entity, much, much smaller, and seldom features a time/space relationship.

Here Charles interrupts to "slightly" disagree with Glenn, in that he thinks that this mural does possess a good bit of the time/space relationship in two ways.

Charles: There are already themes emerging in sections of the mural, which are to some degree a historical evolution, and within the panels, particularly the one over here with the Village Hall. These buildings are done at different periods in the village's existence. There is a sort of a time/space relationship. It is not the continuity that Glenn was talking about. We're not covering the life of Lucy Ames, which would create a rather interesting set of panels if we chose to. But Lucy Ames is going to figure here, probably, somewhere.

Finally when asked to comment on his working methods and general approach to this mural, the artist explained:

Glenn: I very much enjoy having a painting develop in front of me. Although frequently an idea has developed in thought for a long time prior to be painted. But, to sketch it out, to completely plan an idea prior to beginning a painting, can be self-defeating. However, a mural of this size, and particularly one painted on someone else's walls, demands thought ahead of time; you owe your patron some planning before you start. Well, I have been half and half. I both sketched the idea out in advance, and I have also let a good portion of it develop itself in an improvisational manner. And I think this al-

lows for inspiration on a more constant level and a fresher approach from day to day.

I'm using acrylic painting on a very, very fine quality canvas, which has been applied over wallboard and masonry brick. There is little noticeable difference between the two types of wall surfaces. I am essentially a watercolor painter who enjoys the watery, transparent, translucent effects of the medium. Acrylics permit this transparency but have the durability of the plastic-based paints. By using it in a very watered down manner, it gives a feeling that it is in keeping with the hand-blocked or hand-painted mural done in the 19th century. This approach also allows one to bleed from one area into another easily and erase portions of the painting as one decides.

The upstairs hallway is essentially the climax to this mural. And as you enter the upstairs you become aware of the drama of architectural styles and forms that combine the most exciting views and the most predominant buildings in the village into a great crescendo. While downstairs is a very open and spacious treatment of the bluffs and river and quietness, which is intended to welcome the visitor when he steps into the hallway. He can rather gradually work his way up to the large and more dramatic. Our colors are muted in the browns and greens with a few accents here, blues and red, and which are open enough that the interior decoration with the rest of the home can fill adequately and not be in conflict with the mural. At least that is the intent of it.

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Looking at the photos of this mural again and rereading the interview after 20 years have gone by since it was painted and commented upon, Glenn felt a present day commentary about it was in line. He also had this to ask Charles:

Glenn: How is it possible to live with a space as intense as your hallway, year after year?

Charles: The hallway has proven to be a focus for people who visit our house particularly for the first time. For us the hallway has remained the center focus year after year. It gives us both stability and activity - stability in the sense that, as uses of rooms change, the hallway has kept its own character as a color area. It has tended to make the rooms on either side of it on both floors calm. It is a center of activity in the sense that each time we pass the mural we think of different facets of Elsah and its history and architecture.

Glenn adds a "postscript".

Glenn: Looking back on that particular experience I am rather amazed that I felt comfortable enough to accept the Hosmer's invitation to splash and dabble paint throughout their hallway -and that they were so trusting as to let me have virtually a free rein with the imagination. While I vividly remember the experience of painting the mural, the impression that I have today is that Elsah underwent quite a translation during the painting process; the imagery seems of more generic context because of the liberties taken with facts, photos, and visual familiarities.

However, I am haunted by one bizarre, unintentional

oversight: on the LaSalle Street view I omitted the Keller Store - such a favorite Elsah motif! To this day I promise the Hosmers that I will return to insert that wonderful shape. (Perhaps the oversight occurred during one of the moments when the Hosmer children, then quite small, were bouncing a soccer ball off the [unpainted] canvas walls...)

But it is the spirit of the mural which is by far the most important aspect of its identity. If I were to do it from scratch today, it would certainly look different - but I would hope that the spirit of this wonderful little village and its quiet history would nevertheless prevail as the important theme. To that extent, the provenance of art is expected to diverge from strictly historical documentation, and it is that interest in mood, feeling, and content that has become even more important in my current work. (I chuckle to recall the "historic" painting which I did on assignment in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam war. When it came time to properly identify the subjects and the circumstances of the imagery our art team produced, we often couldn't remember the facts. So we made them up and sent our paintings back to the States with essentially fictitious (creative license?) documentation!)

One final note. At the time the mural was painted, most of my art was produced on location, and the mural was in striking contrast to that preference for being in front of the given subject matter. Today, the reverse is true. I much prefer working in the studio developing images from sketches or memory, and thereby crafting a feeling or concept in a manner similar to the process used for the mural.

I am certainly grateful for the mural experience and it seems a solid one these many years later. Even so, I wonder if I could live with it in my own home for all this time without succumbing to a sudden urge to open a can of whitewash!

Glenn Felch is Professor of Art and Chairman of Studio Art at Principia College.

Dr. Charles Hosmer is the Jay P. Walker Professor of History at Principia College.

Groceries in Elsah

For the first time in more than 20 years, Elsah has a grocery store.

Keller's Store, which was started in 1879 by Josephine Keller in "downtown" Elsah, closed in 1970. Since then residents of the village have had to drive great distances to get groceries.

Now that has changed with the opening of the grocery section of "Jeremiah's - Elsah," a consignment/resale shop that has been operating since 1984 on LaSalle Street over the Elsah Landing Restaurant, almost next door to the former Keller's. The stock of groceries at Jeremiah's is tailored to meet the needs of local residents, and the prices are competitive with Alton and Jerseyville grocery stores. Residents of the village, Joywood, Elsah Hills, Principia College, and the outlying

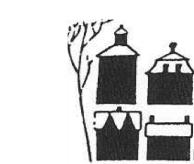
areas can now change their shopping habits if they take advantage of this new service.

Among the items stocked are essentials (flour, sugar, milk, bread, etc.) as well as a few extras (soda pop, ice cream, and candy, for example).

Our next issue, due in late May, will feature the Old Elsah School, its restoration, its first ever reunion, its museum, and more.

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